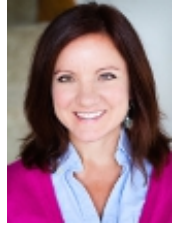


Trump's supporters share his idea of the American dream. And it's all about Vegas, baby

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/07/26/trumps-supporters-share-his-idea-of-the-american-dream-and-its-all-about-vegas-baby/

The 2016 election cycle has seen Donald Trump garner support from those who fared the worst in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the Great Recession. And yet despite the working classes' widespread dislike of the cultural elitism of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, Trump's flaunting of his wealth and privilege has only helped him to win more voters. [Amanda Friesen](#) argues that Trump's 'Las Vegas' lifestyle is a form of living the American Dream that his working-class supporters aspire to.

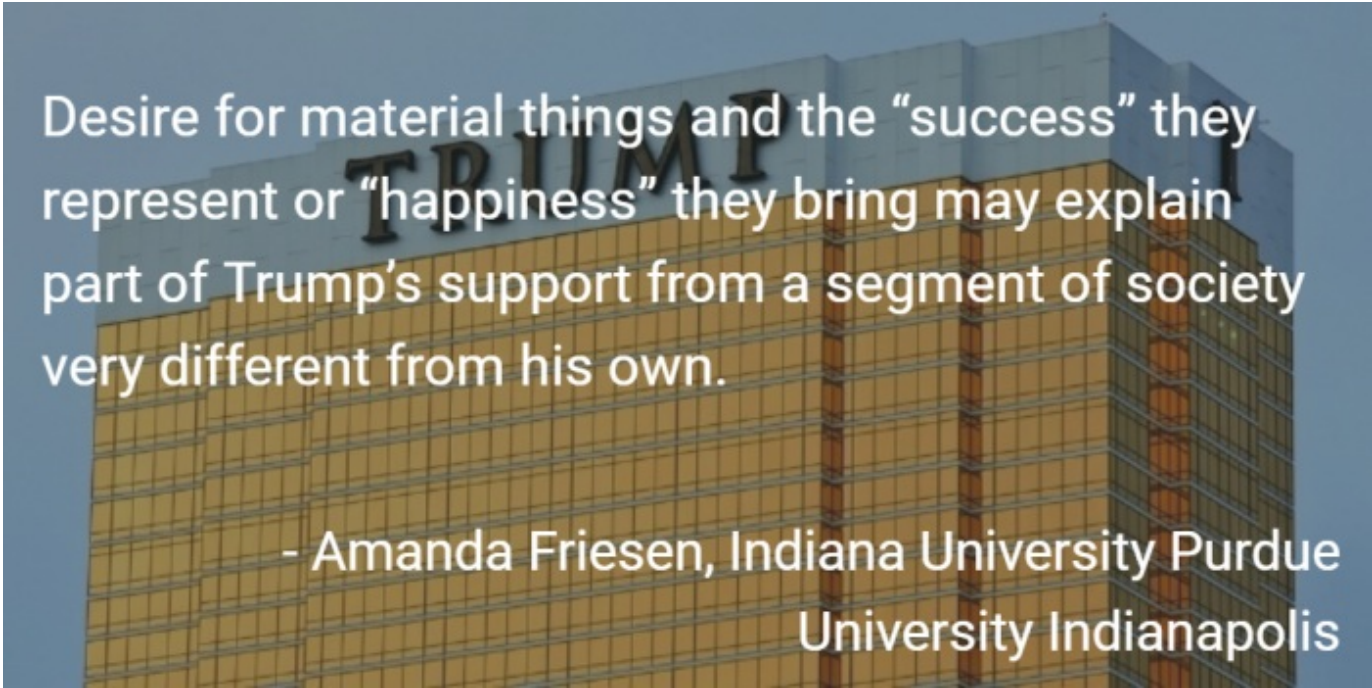


One of the themes of the 2016 election cycle is voter frustration with and alienation from party and political elites. The tension lies in non-wealthy Americans somehow “identifying” with Donald Trump, a man who is essentially famous for being rich. Certainly, scholars and analysts have identified underlying currents of fear and anxiety, authoritarian personalities, and white nostalgia in Trump supporters. Insightful pieces, from the perspective of those who know or have lived among Trump fans, point to the left and other elites misunderstanding these groups of folks struggling economically and culturally (see [“Trump: Tribune of Poor White People”](#)).

After the Republican National Convention, I was puzzled – like many others – by Ivanka Trump’s centrist-almost-progressive plea for equal pay and maternal benefits and former presidential candidate Ben Carson’s Lucifer comments and how voters continue to feel connected to this candidate. But it was real estate magnate Tom Barrack’s rambling best man-like toast to introduce Trump that left me scratching my head. How can tales about spontaneous private jet trips to Vegas and meeting Mike Tyson connect this candidate to the American people? George W. Bush bought a Texas ranch and famously cultivated a cultural populist image to downplay his years in Washington and elite upbringing. Trump seems to campaign in the opposite manner by promoting his wealth, privilege, and connections. Everyday Americans are often skeptical of Hollywood celebrities touting political views – and are unlikely to find soap opera stars relatable – yet asking these individuals to speak at a national political party convention did not diminish this candidate’s appeal.

If working class individuals eschew the elitism of the Clintons (e.g. the “oligarchy” plus personal wealth) and Obama (e.g. [arugula](#), anyone?), how can they be attracted to a man who flaunts his wealth, privilege and Wharton degree? I wonder if it may have more to do with culture than wealth or education. (A great treatise on “The Smug Style in American Liberalism” can be found [here](#)).

Individuals vary in their approaches to saving and spending money and the importance they place on material possessions. Matthew Hibbing and I recently published an [article](#) that explores the relationship between personal money attitudes and government spending (spoiler alert: results are mixed, and Americans do not seem to expect the government to spend money as they do in their households). Because the data was collected in 2010, I cannot test Trump support alongside material attitudes but I wish to suggest that desire for material things and the “success” they represent or “happiness” they bring may explain part of Trump’s support from a segment of society very different from his own.



Desire for material things and the “success” they represent or “happiness” they bring may explain part of Trump’s support from a segment of society very different from his own.

- Amanda Friesen, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis

Let’s look at the ways Trump has leveraged his money:

- Flashy hotels with his name in bright lights
- Casinos and golf courses
- Private jets and vacations
- Starring in his own reality TV show
- Running a beauty pageant
- Appearing in movies and TV shows, as himself (Home Alone is my personal favorite)
- Inserting himself as a character in WWE

He is not building libraries at Harvard or chateaus in the French Riviera (at least not that we hear about). He has not been married to the same person for 40 years and together built a dynasty of children and grandchildren who all attend Ivy League schools and work as doctors and lawyers and engineers. No, Trump has been married multiple times; his children work for his company; he spends money when he has it, declares bankruptcy and then gets rich again. If this man was operating on an annual salary under \$40,000, we might collectively raise up our noses at the irresponsibility, lack of prudence, moral failure and overall poor decision-making, probably borne of his “class.” Yet, Trump’s rocky past seems bullet proof.

It has been argued that lower socio-economic voters support policies, parties and candidates that benefit the wealthy because of some general “belief” in the American dream and the hope that somehow they might make it (even if their only hope is a winning lottery ticket). I suggest we take this theory a step further and wonder if Trump supporters at a certain economic level and from a certain cultural background would make exactly his choices, if they had the money. They do not aspire to hob-knobbing over foie gras and a ‘78 Margaux before the Met Gala; they want ringside seats at Mayweather-Pacquiao with the penthouse suite at MGM Grand. In many ways, Trump IS Vegas, and Vegas is a popular destination or dream destination for Americans of many backgrounds (the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority [reports](#) about half of its annual visitors since 2011 are not college graduates). In 2015, 85 percent of visitors were white, and about half of them earn less than \$80,000/year.

For many Americans, Trump is living the dream. And perhaps if he is elected president, they can, too.

Featured [image](#) credit: [Håkan Dahlström](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-2.0](#))

This article is based on the paper, '[The Effect of Personal Economic Values on Economic Policy Preferences](#)' in *Social Science Quarterly*.

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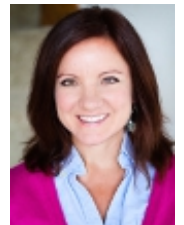
Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Amanda Friesen – *Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis*

Amanda Friesen joined the faculty at IUPUI as an Assistant Professor in Political Science and a Faculty Research Fellow with the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture in 2012, after earning her Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research interests involve the areas of political psychology, religion and politics, gender and politics, and behavior genetics. She has published in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London-B*, *Political Behavior*, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, *Politics and Religion*, *Social Science Quarterly*, and *Politics & Gender*.



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